Chapter 40
A FEW DAYS AFTER I RETURNED TO THE INNER COURT, A WICKER TRUNK FROM MEIMEI ARRIVED.
THERE WAS A LETTER INSIDE IT DETAILING WHOSE CONTRACT HAD BEEN BOUGHT OUT AND BY WHOM...
...ALONG WITH A LOVELY SHAWL.
NOW LISTEN, MAOMAO.
WHEN THE TIME COMES FOR ME TO LEAVE THIS PLACE, YOU HAVE TO DANCE YOUR HEART OUT!

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Chapter 40 Send-Off

I'M DOING JUST AS LADY FUYO DID LAST YEAR, WHEN SHE WAS GIVEN AS A BRIDE TO THAT SOLDIER.
HOW IRONIC.
MY LEFT FOOT HASN'T HEALED, SO I'M NOT AT MY BEST.
WELL, I SUP-POSE IT'S FINE.
SHP

I'M SURPRISED I STILL REMEMBER THE STEPS.
SWISH
しゃらん
しゃらん
SWISH

UH?!
SNAG

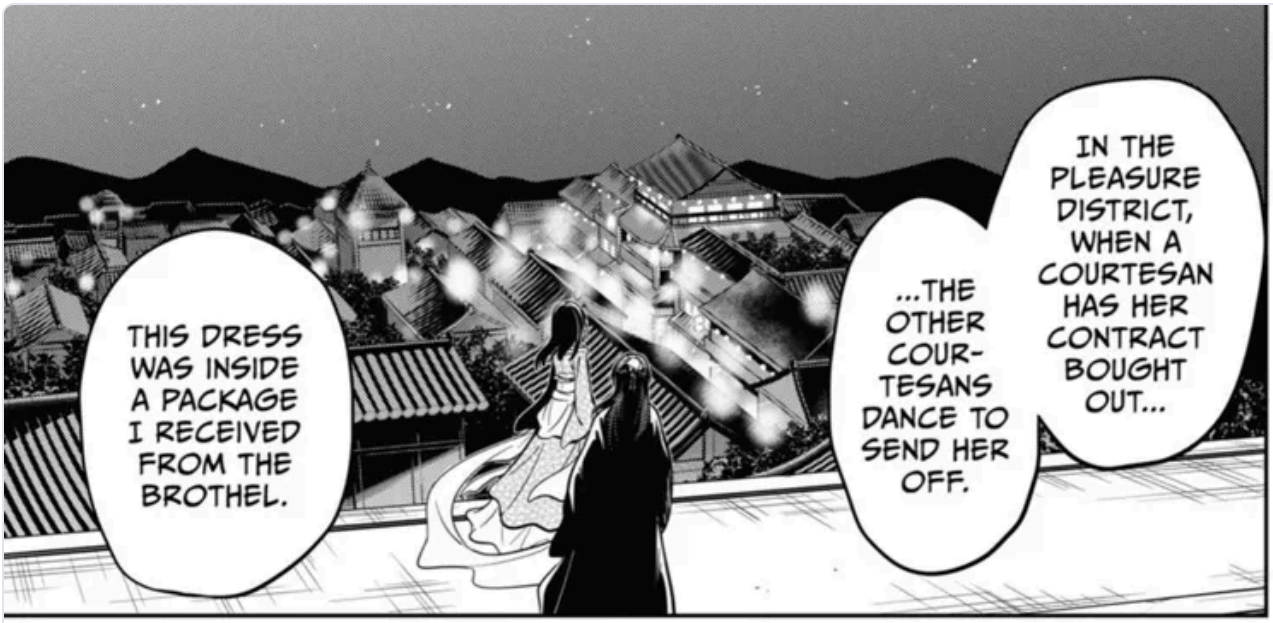
YANK
WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP HERE ?!

I RECEIVED A REPORT OF YET ANOTHER STRANGE WOMAN CLIMBING THE WALLS AGAIN...
...SO I HAD TO COME AND DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

...I MIGHT ASK YOU THE SAME.
WHY ARE YOU HERE?

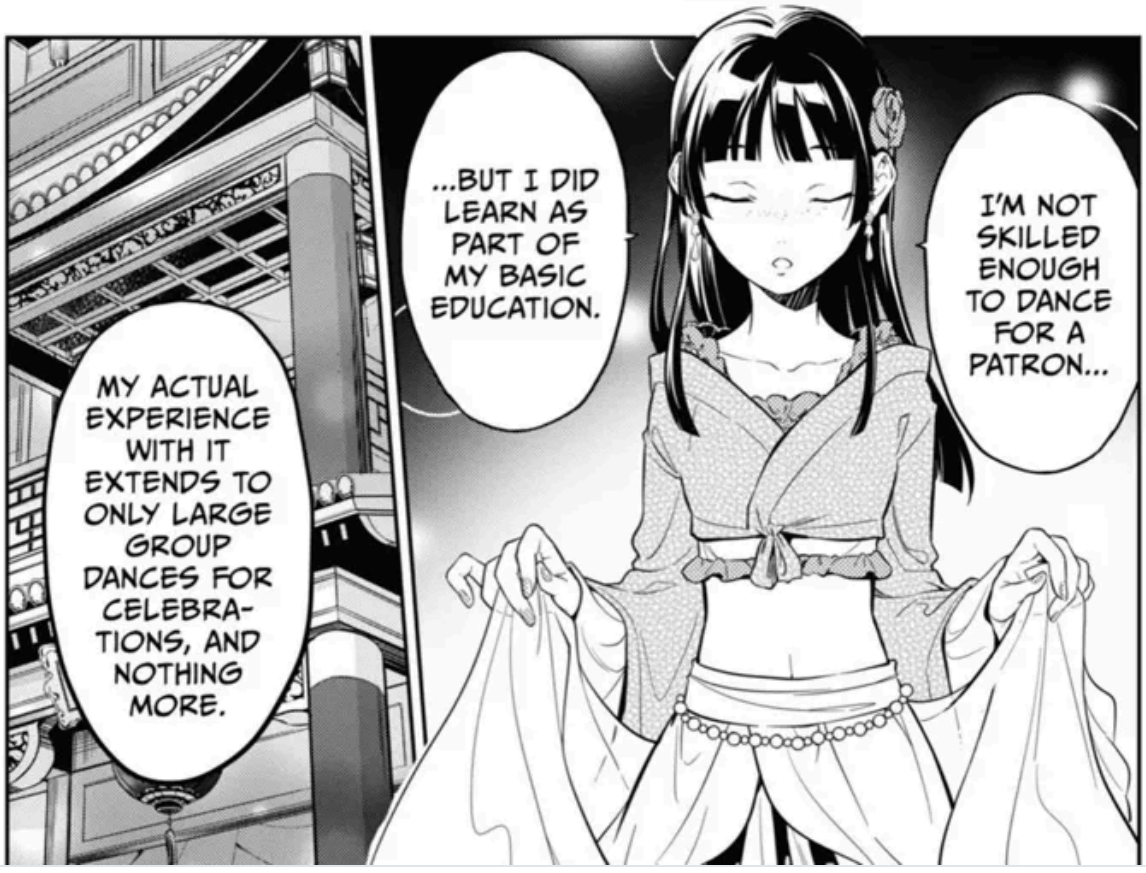
GOOD GRIEF.
I WAS TRYING TO DO IT ON THE SLY, BUT I GUESS I'VE BEEN FOUND OUT.

よじ
CLIMB
よじ
CLIMB
SURELY YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO GO TO THE TROUBLE OF COMING OUT HERE YOURSELF?
A KIND GUARD RECOGNIZED YOU...
...AND TOLD ME WHAT HE SAW.
ぽPAT ん
DON'T GO MAKING MORE WORK FOR ME.
SO...
...WITH THAT SAID, WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU UP TO THIS TIME?
AS YOU WISH.
WHAT A PAIN.
YOU MAY THINK THAT YOU'RE BEING DISCREET...
...BUT KEEP IN MIND THAT THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU MIGHT NOT SEE IT THAT WAY.

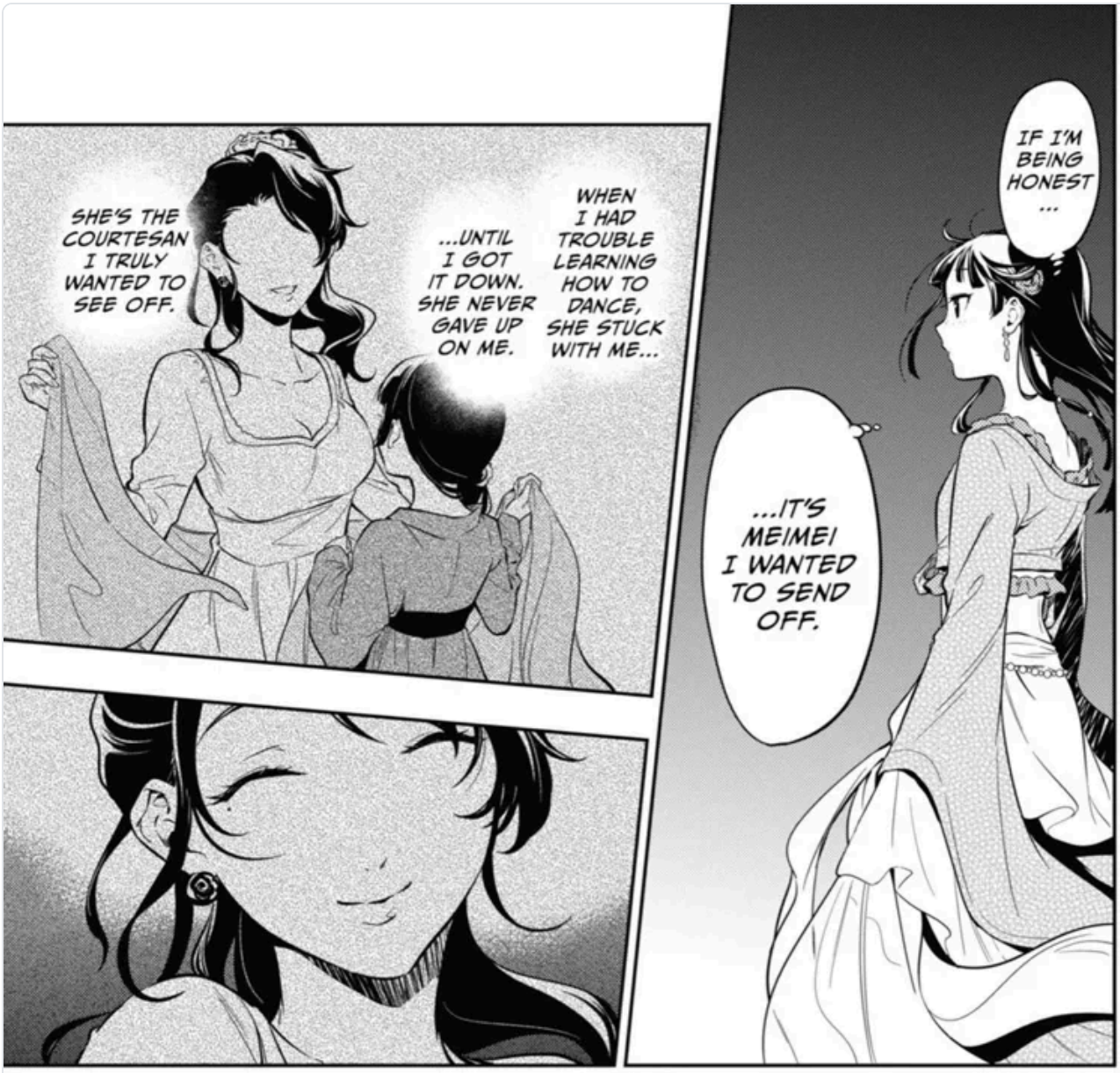

IN THE PLEASURE DISTRICT, WHEN A COURTESAN HAS HER CONTRACT BOUGHT OUT...
...THE OTHER COUR-TESANS DANCE TO SEND HER OFF.
THIS DRESS WAS INSIDE A PACKAGE I RECEIVED FROM THE BROTHEL.

NO.
I'M JUST AMAZED YOU KNOW HOW TO DANCE.

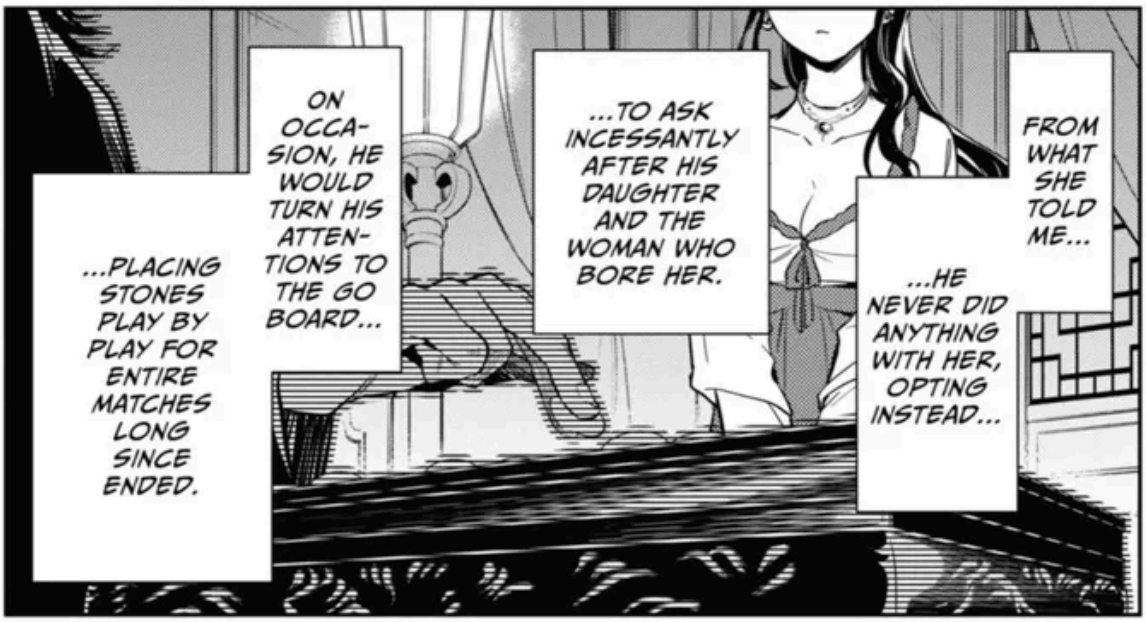
STARE
WHAT?

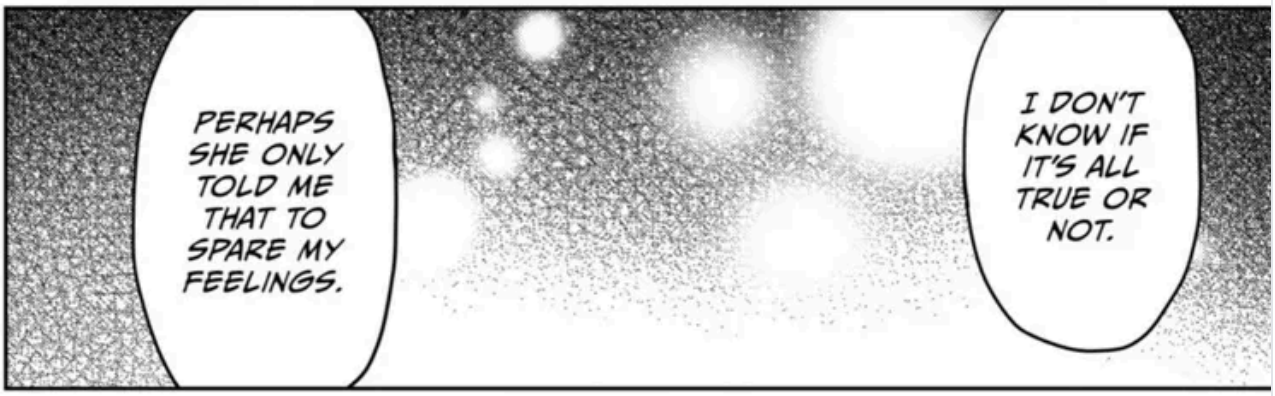

...BUT I DID LEARN AS PART OF MY BASIC EDUCATION.
I'M NOT SKILLED ENOUGH TO DANCE FOR A PATRON...
MY ACTUAL EXPERIENCE WITH IT EXTENDS TO ONLY LARGE GROUP DANCES FOR CELEBRA-TIONS, AND NOTHING MORE.

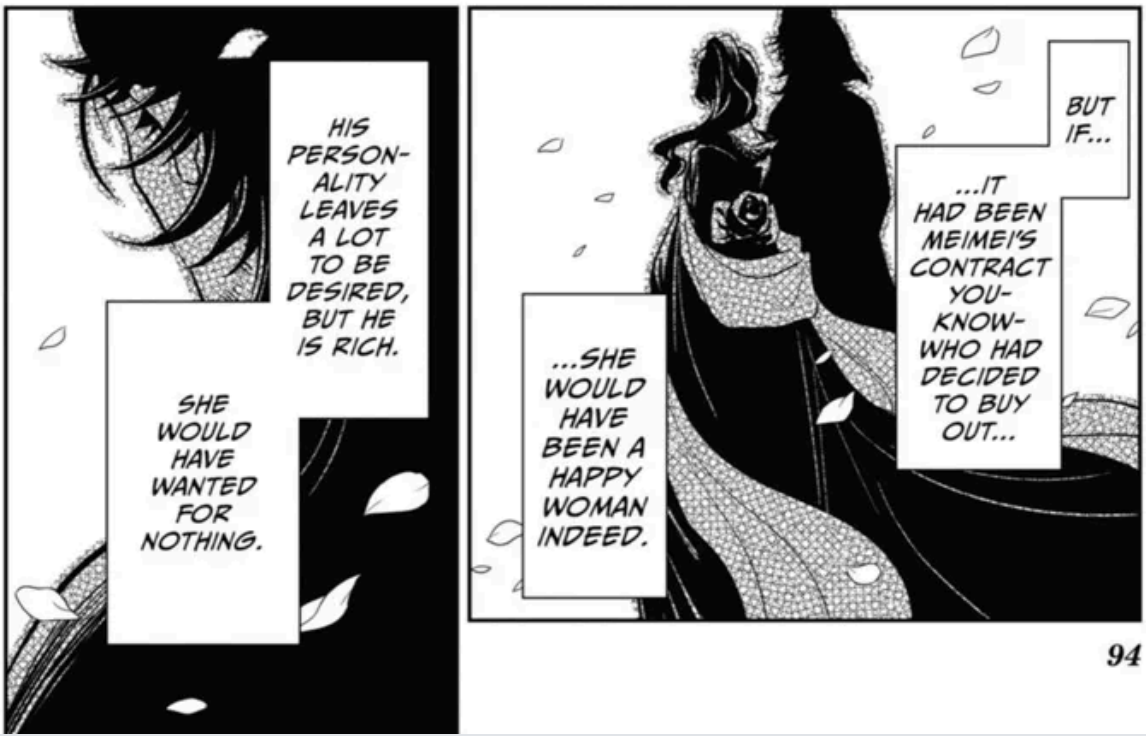
NEVER MIND THE TYPICAL THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS OF CELEBRATION... THIS TIME, THEY MAY WELL LAST AN ENTIRE WEEK.
MY SISTER MENTIONED SOMETHING TO THAT EFFECT IN HER LETTER TOO.
BY THE BY, HE ALSO PUT IN FOR A LEAVE OF ABSENCE.
HE'S PLANNING TO TAKE TEN DAYS OFF.
I'LL BET.
THAT CRANK TAKING A COURTESAN FOR HIS WIFE...
IT'S ALL ANYONE CAN TALK ABOUT BEYOND THE PALACE WALLS.
I HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH THAT MAN PAID...
...BUT JUDGING BY ALL THE LANTERNS THAT WENT UP, IT WAS FAR MORE THAN MOST COURTESANS COMMAND.
VERDIGRIS
IT'LL BECOME THE TALK OF THE TOWN. JUST WHAT THE OLD BAT IS HOPING FOR.
SOON, OFFICIALS LOOKING FOR A BIT OF FUN WILL BE KNOCKING AT THE BROTHEL'S DOORS JUST TO SATISFY THEIR CURIOSITY.
THEY'LL ALL BE WONDERING WHAT OTHER GEMS, THE THREE PRINCESSES ASIDE, VERDIGRIS MIGHT HAVE HIDDEN AWAY.
EVERYONE WILL BE DYING TO KNOW ABOUT THE BEAUTY WHO WON THE ECCENTRIC'S HEART.
I'M SURE THE COURTESAN WHO IS TO BE WED WILL BE DRESSED MOST EXTRAVAGANTLY.
BUT I DOUBT THEY'LL SHOW HER OFF IN PUBLIC.


IF I'M BEING HONEST ...
...IT'S MEIMEI I WANTED TO SEND OFF.
WHEN I HAD TROUBLE LEARNING HOW TO DANCE, SHE STUCK WITH ME...
...UNTIL I GOT IT DOWN. SHE NEVER GAVE UP ON ME.
SHE'S THE COURTESAN I TRULY WANTED TO SEE OFF.

WHAT WOULD GO THROUGH MEIMEI'S MIND...
...EVERY TIME SHE WELCOMED THAT MAN INTO HER CHAMBERS? I COULDN'T SAY.


...PLACING STONES PLAY BY PLAY FOR ENTIRE MATCHES LONG SINCE ENDED.
ON OCCASION, HE WOULD TURN HIS ATTENTIONS TO THE GO BOARD...
...TO ASK INCESSANTLY AFTER HIS DAUGHTER AND THE WOMAN WHO BORE HER.
...HE NEVER DID ANYTHING WITH HER, OPTING INSTEAD...
FROM WHAT SHE TOLD ME...


PERHAPS SHE ONLY TOLD ME THAT TO SPARE MY FEELINGS.
I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S ALL TRUE OR NOT.


HIS PERSONALITY LEAVES A LOT TO BE DESIRED, BUT HE IS RICH.
SHE WOULD HAVE WANTED FOR NOTHING.
...SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN A HAPPY WOMAN INDEED.
...IT HAD BEEN MEIMEI'S CONTRACT YOU-KNOW-WHO HAD DECIDED TO BUY OUT...
BUT IF...
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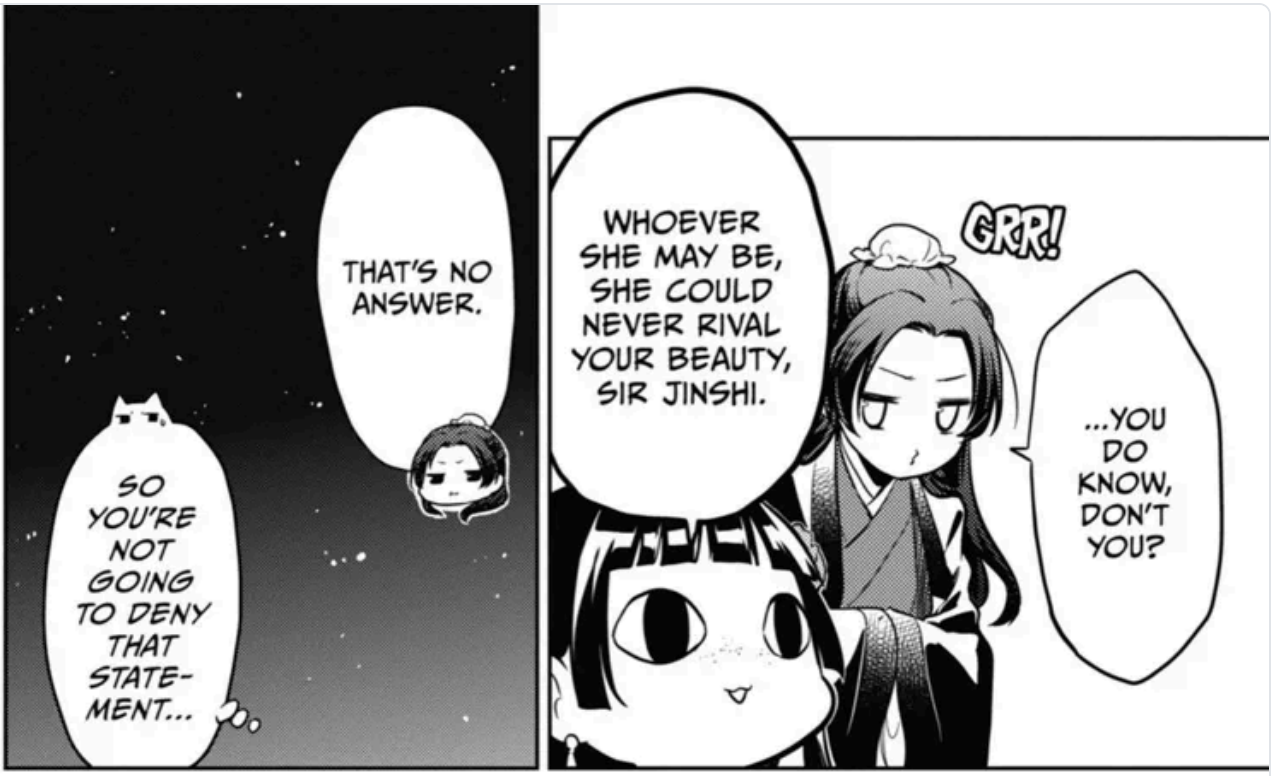
EVEN IF THAT WEREN'T THE CASE, I'M SURE MEIMEI, WITH HER BEAUTY AND SOPHISTI-CATION...
...WOULD HAVE MADE THE PERFECT WIFE.
I DON'T KNOW IF HE EVENTUALLY FOUND THE LETTER OR NOT...
HE SHOULD HAVE CHOSEN HER.
...BUT IT SEEMS HE DID MANAGE TO FIND THE WOMAN THE OLD MADAM HAD HIDDEN AWAY FROM HIM FOR SO LONG.
IT'S MUCH ADO FOR A MERE PROMISE.
DO YOU KNOW WHO IT IS?
WHOSE FREEDOM DID HE END UP BUYING? SHE MUST BE QUITE SPECIAL.
SEARCH ME!
YES, I WONDER.


THAT'S NO ANSWER.
SO YOU'RE NOT GOING TO DENY THAT STATE-MENT...
WHOEVER SHE MAY BE, SHE COULD NEVER RIVAL YOUR BEAUTY, SIR JINSHI.
GRR!
...YOU DO KNOW, DON'T YOU?

THAT MAN'S CHOSEN WIFE...
...ISN'T LONG FOR THIS WORLD.
ALL SHE DOES NOW IS LAY OUT HER GO STONES.
RAVAGED BY THE DISEASE, SHE'S LOST HER MEMORIES AND MERELY SINGS LIKE A LITTLE GIRL.

I'M GUESSING THE MADAM SWORE THEM TO SILENCE.
NO ONE AT THE BROTHEL EVER SPOKE OF THE WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO ME.
...THAT MY BIRTH HAD BROUGHT VERDIGRIS TO ITS KNEES, NEARLY RUINING IT...
IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE...
BUT GOSSIP IS AN UNRULY THING.
...AND THAT THE COURTESAN IN QUESTION WAS THE STRICKEN WOMAN IN THE SICKROOM.
...THAT THE BLAME LAY WITH A COURTESAN WHO'D FLOUTED THE RULES AND DONE AS SHE PLEASED...

THE WOMAN WHO, ASHAMED OF LOSING HER NOSE...
...DISTANCED HERSELF FROM THE MAN SHE LOVED UNTIL HER HEART BROKE.
BUT I HAVE NO MEMORIES OF THE WOMAN WHO BORE ME.
A COUR-TESAN WHO HAD A CHILD...
A MISGUIDED WOMAN WHO, WHEN THINGS DID NOT GO TO PLAN AND HER LOVER FAILED TO RETURN...
...LOST HERSELF AND HER MIND.
SO MUCH SO...
...THAT SHE BELIEVED SHE SHOULD SEND NOT JUST HER FINGER, BUT ALSO THE LITTLE FINGER OF HER CHILD, WITH HER LETTER TO HER LOVE.

THAT DREAM OF THE DEMONIC HAG WAS NO DREAM. IT'S MY REALITY.
BUT IT'S NOT AS IF I REMEMBER THAT EITHER.
ALL I HAVE LEFT IS THIS DEFORMED PINKY.
IF THERE WAS ANYTHING LINKING ME TO THAT WOMAN, IT'S LONG GONE NOW.
I'VE FOUND HAPPINESS IN BEING LUOMEN'S DAUGHTER.

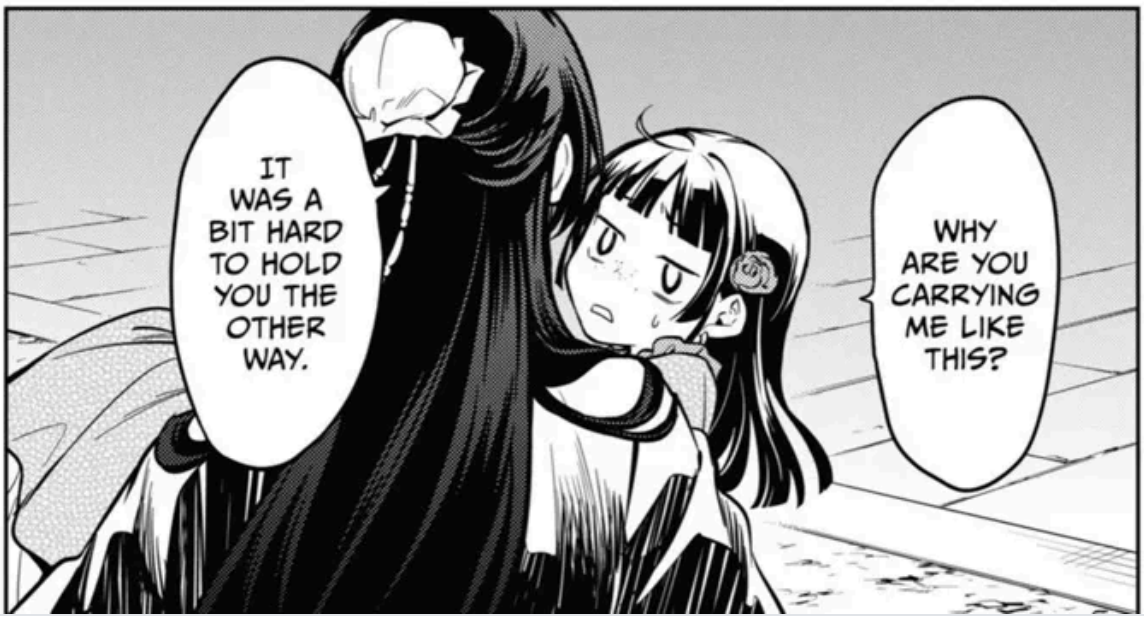
SWISH
SIR JINSHI.
YES?
DID YOU KNOW THAT FINGERTIPS GROW BACK EVEN WHEN CUT OFF?
...AND YOU'RE TELLING ME AT THIS MOMENT BECAUSE ...?
DRIIP
?!
GOSH, I'M AFRAID I'VE REOPENED MY WOUND.
OH NO! NOW WHAT?!
WHOA!
100

PERHAPS BECAUSE I WAS HOT FROM DANCING.
あた FLAIL
ふた FLAIL
WHY DIDN'T YOU NOTICE SOONER?!
DON'T YOU "GOSH" ME AS IF IT'S NOTHING!
WHY ARE YOU SO WELL-PRE-PARED?!
I CARRY ALCOHOL, NEEDLE, AND THREAD WITH ME NOW.
FRET NOT!
チャキーン TA-DAA
CHILL
IT MIGHT BE THE MEDICINES I'VE BEEN TESTING OUT.
AT ANY RATE, MY SENSE OF PAIN HAS BEEN DULLED.
GYAAAH!
DON'T BE SILLY. FOR TIMES LIKE THESE, OF COURSE.

I CAN'T STITCH MYSELF UP IF YOU DO THAT, SIR.
YES, WELL, DON'T !!
GRIP
GRAB
?!
WH—
YANK
DO BAM

??!
バ
WHOOSH
ザリ SCUFF
ザリ SCUFF
?!
?
たんっ THUMP
SIR JIN...
UH, HEY!

...SHI...


IT WAS A BIT HARD TO HOLD YOU THE OTHER WAY.
WHY ARE YOU CARRYING ME LIKE THIS?

I FEEL INCREDIBLY UNCOMFORT-ABLE BEING SO CLOSE TO HIM, THOUGH.
BUT YOUR WOUND WILL ONLY REOPEN MORE.
THEN PUT ME DOWN.
IT IS?
BESIDES, THIS IS THE SECOND TIME I'VE CARRIED YOU LIKE THIS.
IT'S DARK, SO I DOUBT ANYONE WILL.
WHAT IF SOMEONE SEES?
OH.
IT MUST HAVE BEEN WHEN I FAINTED AFTER GETTING HURT.
THERE WAS QUITE A CROWD OF PEOPLE AROUND THE FIRST TIME.

GASP
BECAUSE THIS IS SOMETHING I REALLY MUST SAY TO YOU. I CAN'T KEEP QUIET ABOUT IT ANY LONGER.
IT'S TOO IMPORTANT FOR THAT.
SIR JINSHI.
TUG
I KNOW THIS IS HARDLY THE TIME OR PLACE FOR IT...
...BUT THERE IS SOMETHING I'VE BEEN NEGLECTING TO BRING UP FOR QUITE A WHILE.
WHY ARE YOU BEING SO FORMAL ALL OF A SUDDEN ...?

GULP
THEN OUT WITH IT ALREADY.
VERY WELL!
MAY I PLEASE HAVE THE BEZOAR YOU PROM-ISED?

OWWH!
YUH...
YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT YOU DON'T ALREADY HAVE IT?!

HOW DARE YOU SAY SUCH A THING?!

WHAT AM I TO DO WITH YOU?!
WELL, BUT THEN AGAIN ...
EVEN SO, HOW IMMATURE OF HIM TO HEADBUTT ME WITHOUT WARNING.
HMPH!

...WHEN HE'S BEING A BRAT.
...I'M MORE AT EASE TALKING TO HIM...

AFTER-WARD, A RUMOR WOULD CIRCU-LATE...
...THAT A CERTAIN NOBLEMAN OF A GREAT NATION WAS GATHERING UP ALL MANNER OF MIRACLE CURES...
...AND JINSHI'S OFFICE WOULD OVERFLOW WITH GET-WELL-SOON FLOWERS FOR SOME REASON.
BUT THESE TWO WEREN'T TO KNOW THAT YET.